

Music Box Films Presents

THE  
**PERFECT  
CANDIDATE**

A FILM BY HAIFAA AL MANSOUR

2019 Venice International Film Festival  
2019 Toronto International Film Festival  
2020 Sundance Film Festival



Website: <https://www.musicboxfilms.com/film/the-perfect-candidate/>

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## LOGLINE

A steadfast young doctor's run for city council sweeps up her family and community as they struggle to accept their town's first female candidate in Haifaa Al Mansour's (WADJDA) revealing look at the changing roles of women in Saudi Arabia.



## SYNOPSIS

A revealing look at the changing roles of women in Saudi Arabia from director Haifaa Al Mansour (WADJDA), *THE PERFECT CANDIDATE* follows Maryam, a determined young doctor who runs for city council after the male incumbent repeatedly ignores her request to fix the muddy road leading to her clinic. Despite her father and her community's struggle to accept her as their town's first female candidate, Maryam's creative and ambitious campaign builds momentum, becoming a symbol for a larger movement.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

THE PERFECT CANDIDATE focuses on a female Saudi doctor who challenges the patriarchal system by running as a candidate in the municipal council elections in order to fix the road leading up to her clinic. Through her journey I want to show an optimistic view of the role women can play in Saudi society and the contributions they can make towards forging their own destinies. I want to encourage Saudi women to take a chance and break away from the system that for so long has held us back. Change must ultimately be sustained and driven by the people who are most in need of improvements and increased mobility in their daily lives. The subtext of the film focuses on the need to celebrate and honor our strong cultural and artistic traditions and to let them guide the efforts to develop and modernize the country. All public displays of art have been forbidden in the modern era of the country's development. As concert halls, movie theaters and art galleries begin to open up across the Kingdom again, it is important to look back at the rich artistic history we almost lost. There is beautiful music and rich imagery that we must revive, restore and reinvigorate within our society. With the opening of cinemas and allowing women to drive in the Kingdom, I want to show how much effort real change will entail. Women will now have opportunities to contribute and participate in a society that kept them on the sidelines for generations. The hardest part now is for women to look beyond the antiquated social standards and limited goals they had previously seen for themselves, to shatter the taboos that hold them back and decide to blaze new trails for themselves and their daughters.



## **INTERVIEW WITH HAIFAA AL MANSOUR**

**What brought you back to Saudi Arabia to tell a new story touching on the empowerment of women?**

There are incredible changes taking place right now at home in Saudi Arabia, and I felt like I really wanted to contribute to the positive changes taking place there. We went through such a long period of time where nothing changed, where it seemed like even the slightest openings or relaxations of the cultural restraints we lived under seemed impossible, especially when it came to the lives of women. But now the pace of change is so fast that it is hard to keep up with, and the challenge now is to encourage people to go out and make the most of the opportunities they have. Especially for women, it will take a huge shift in thinking to fully understand and embrace the freedoms they now have the chance to explore.

So I really wanted to tell a story about a culturally conservative, traditional woman who decides to embrace these changes and go out there and seize the moment. The reality of her journey is that it will be difficult, and lots of people will be critical of her choices, but it will ultimately open up a whole new world for her. I want to stress to the women of Saudi Arabia how important it is to go out there and take a

chance, even if you don't have any experience in doing so. It is still hard for Saudi women to put themselves out there, and they are nervous about doing things they haven't done before like driving, traveling or uncovering their faces. I also wanted to take a moment to celebrate the strong artistic and cultural legacy of Saudi Arabia and tell a story that stresses how important it is that we build upon those traditions as the foundation for our society's development. So much of our music, theater, stories, and all forms of artistic expression were nearly erased from our culture entirely, so I felt like we needed a story that reminded people of the strong artistic traditions we have, and how they can help us as we move forward into an exciting future.

**Saudi Arabia has undergone significant changes since you directed WADJDA, the first film ever shot entirely in the Kingdom. How is your situation as a Saudi filmmaker different now from seven or eight years ago?**

The changes are extraordinary for local filmmakers. It was incredibly difficult to make a film in 2011, and people were still very hesitant to embrace any public form of artistic expression. Film especially was seen as taboo, and the idea of opening theaters had become a red line that most of us thought would never be crossed. Of course now everything has changed, and we have cinemas going up all across the Kingdom. But the larger issue of a lack of infrastructure in the film industry remains. We have a lot of work to do in building up the tools and resources necessary to make quality films. We don't have many people with experience in the field yet so putting together a crew and getting the right equipment is still very difficult. Getting the proper training and education necessary to help craft and shape our stories is another key area that we need to develop. But things are happening fast, and I think we will see a lot more Saudi films in the coming years. We needed a story that reminded people of the strong artistic traditions we have, and how they can help us as we move

forward into an exciting future.

**You directed sequences of WADJDA from the confines of a van in order not to mix with men on set. Were things on set much different for this film?**

It was really great to be out of the van! Being allowed to freely mix with my crew and be fully immersed in the production was amazing. It was also very exciting to have so many enthusiastic young Saudis working on the set. They are the future of the industry, and to see them giving their all to contribute and be a part of making the film was very special for me. As I said we still have a long way to go in building our local crews and expertise, but the enthusiasm is there to build upon. It is an exciting time to be a filmmaker from Saudi Arabia!



**Your main character Maryam's profession as a doctor connects to other larger issues in the film. How common is it for men and women to interact closely together in the workplace?**

There are a lot of professions that are seen as taboo by Saudi women, especially if the job requires women to come into contact with men outside of their family. Although there are women that would consider it improper, medicine is a profession that even a lot of generally



conservative women would pursue because of the prestige associated with it. I wanted to create a character that is very much representative of the mainstream mentality of Saudi women. She covers her face and follows the cultural norms of the society, but ends up pushing boundaries because she wants to do her job well. The restrictions that keep her from performing her work in the ways that would best benefit the society frustrate her and force her to think outside the box. She is not a rebel for the sake of rebellion – she is someone that knows that her work can make the country a better place and simply wants to remove the barriers that prevent her from accomplishing her mission. I believe strongly that this is the way that true change comes to a society, through hard-working people who simply want to be able to reach their highest potential.

**How did you cast Maryam and her sisters? Has it become any easier to cast for female roles?**

Casting was generally easier this time but it is still very much a challenge, especially in casting women. I had seen both Mila Al Zahrani's and Dhay's work before, so I was excited to audition both of them and see what they could bring to the roles. It was nice to talk with actresses who had some experience, in both traditional and social media – Dhay for example is a social media star and major influencer in Saudi Arabia. So both were actresses who brought the youth and energy I wanted to see in the roles.

**In both WADJDA and THE PERFECT CANDIDATE we see how women exist in two starkly different worlds, private and public. Can you tell us more about this private world?**

The private world of Saudi women is very unique, in that their public lives are so incredibly limited. In public our entire identities are hidden, and our movements and opportunities have always been constricted and controlled. But in private, at home or in women-only gatherings, the

coverings are lifted and there is that feeling of freedom and relaxation from all of the pressures we carry outside. The home is very much a sanctuary for women, and I always want to show the strong familial bonds that we have. Weddings, which are also gender segregated in the Kingdom, are another place where women can let loose and be themselves, so it is another setting that feature prominently in the film. I want to show the world what Saudi women are like when the coverings come off, when we can just be ourselves, dance and be sassy or whatever.



**What inspired Maryam’s father’s character and storyline? What role does music have in Saudi Arabia’s culture?**

There is a strong parallel between Maryam’s journey to find her own voice and purpose and that of her father’s long journey in the arts. Our country is at a crossroads, and we now have the opportunity to participate in the changes that will shape our society going forward. Maryam has come to resent her parents’ careers in music because it was always a taboo in the culture. It made the whole family outsiders, and kept her from being accepted in the mainstream. But what she doesn’t realize is that the defiance of her parents, to go after their dreams despite the disapproval of the local society, is exactly the same as her desire to carry out her job at the highest level. Her parents wanted to make the



country better through art, and she wants to do it through medicine. I want Saudis to see the value of our almost-lost artistic traditions, and understand how crucial they will be as a foundation for our future.

**What do you expect might be the most surprising element of the film for Western audiences?**

Even with WADJDA, I heard from a lot of foreign audiences that were surprised by how strong and sassy Saudi women actually are. There is this perception that we are weak and shy and afraid of the world, and that we are just victims resigned to the limited, restrictive circumstances of our culture. It is so not true! Saudi women are so tough, feisty, funny and way more savvy than most people realize. I hope this film further captures the fire and bravery of women from my country. Telling their stories is the honor and privilege of my life.

**How does it feel to know that your film could get a theatrical release in your home country?**

Seeing my film play in theaters back home was a huge incentive for me in making this film. I honestly never dreamed that movie theaters would open in Saudi Arabia in my lifetime, so it is truly a dream come true. When they opened the first theater in the Eastern Province, where I grew up, the theater put up a huge billboard with my picture on it. My family was sending around the picture of it and it was an incredibly emotional moment for me. To be celebrated publicly at home, as an artist and a woman, is something I still have a hard time believing is real. I am so excited to screen the film there!

**Can you tell us about some of the initiatives you are involved in to support and develop film, art and culture in the Kingdom?**

Last year, I was incredibly honored to be appointed by the Saudi minister of culture and information to join the board of directors for the Kingdom's General Authority for Culture. It has been very exciting to see all of the changes and developments underway within the cultural sphere in the country. However, I still feel that my main mission is that of a filmmaker, telling stories and creating films that travel the world and bring Saudi voices outside of the region. I want to continue to offer opportunities for Saudis to work on films that have artistic and cultural value, that help lay the foundations for a real film industry in the Kingdom, and that show the world we have stories worth telling.

**In 2019, a royal decree lifted the requirement for women to obtain a guardian's permission to travel internationally, the catalyst for your story. How important is this breakthrough?**

All of the recent breakthroughs that have come for women in Saudi Arabia are important and represent huge, seismic shifts for the region. That is why I chose to start the film with the main character driving a car. It is something that would have seemed impossible even a year ago. Now it is up to women to accept these changes in their own lives and take the risks that come with trying something new. I hope more women will start driving, and working in mixed environments with men, or travelling, or just doing the things that make them happy. Now is the time!



*Photo © Brigitte Lacombe*

## **DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY**

Haifaa Al Mansour finished her bachelor's degree in Literature at the American University in Cairo and completed a Master's degree in Directing and Film Studies from the University of Sydney. She is considered the first female filmmaker in Saudi Arabia and her feature film WADJDA was the first feature film ever to be shot entirely inside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Invited to over 40 festivals worldwide, WADJDA garnered numerous awards - among others in Venice, Rotterdam and Dubai.

### **Filmography**

2019: THE PERFECT CANDIDATE

2017: NAPPILY EVERAFTER

2016: MARY SHELLEY

2012: WADJDA

2005: WOMEN WITHOUT SHADOWS [Documentary]

## CAST BIOGRAPHIES

**Mila Al Zahrani** represents the new wave of Saudi actresses making their mark on the regional drama scene. Landing her first leading role in 2016, she quickly rose to fame and popularity. She is known for talking on characters that are unconventional and empowering. Her starring role in the Saudi drama BOXING GIRLS as a boxing champion launched her to stardom within the Kingdom.

**Khalid Abdulrahim:** THE PERFECT CANDIDATE is Khalid's first role as an actor. He is, however, very well known within the underground folk music scene in Saudi Arabia. He started and led several bands that have played extensively across the country since the ban on public performances was lifted. He also works to provide space and opportunities for young musicians to build their talents and perform.

**Dhay:** From social media to acting Dhay is quickly making a name for herself on a variety of media platforms. Although well known as an influencer and leader on social media, where she is pushing boundaries in the ways in which Saudi women represent themselves in virtual spaces, Dhay is a rising star in the world of traditional media as well, landing several roles in local television productions.

**Shafi Al Harthi** is one of the Kingdom's most prolific actors. He has been acting for the past 20 years and ranks among the biggest and well known stars in the world of Saudi TV. He is known for his grittier roles, specifically portraying a tough police officer, so playing a supportive and funny friend is a departure for him as an actor.



## KEY CAST

<b>Maryam:</b>	Mila Alzahrani
<b>Selma:</b>	Dhay
<b>Abdulaziz:</b>	Khalid Abdulrhim
<b>Mohammed:</b>	Shafi Al Harthy

## KEY CREW

<b>Directed by:</b>	Haifaa Al Mansour
<b>Written by:</b>	Haifaa Al Mansour, Brad Niemann
<b>Line Producer:</b>	Ole Nicolaisen
<b>Production Designer:</b>	Olivier Meidinger, ADC - VSK
<b>Costume Designer:</b>	Heike Fademrecht
<b>Makeup Artist:</b>	Dorothea Wiedermann
<b>Recording Mixer:</b>	Uve Haußig
<b>Sound Designer:</b>	Sebastian Schmidt

**Re-Recording Mixer:** Olaf Mehl  
**Composer:** Volker Bertelmann  
**Editor:** Andreas Wodraschke, BFS  
**Cinematographer:** Patrick Orth  
**Produced by:** Roman Paul, Gerhard Meixner, Haifaa Al  
Mansour, Brad Niemann



## TECHNICAL DETAILS

**Running Time:** 105 min  
**Aspect Ratio:** 2.39:1  
**Sound:** 5.1  
**Year:** 2019  
**Language:** Arabic with English Subtitles  
**Countries of Production:** Saudi Arabia, Germany